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Rethinking marketplace culture: Play and the context of context

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Rethinking marketplace culture: Play and the ‘context of context’

For Peer Review

Abstract

Play theory has been under utilised to understand consumer behaviour. In this paper we adopt a play theory perspective to understand how consumers respond to and navigate macrostructural influences. The marketplace culture stream of consumer culture theory (CCT) research is particularly well suited to macrostructural analysis from a play theory perspective. We develop an analytical framework derived from play theory to interpret the context of marketplace culture. We show how the types of play foundational to marketplace culture experiences act as expressions of order or disorder to wider macrostructural influences. In contrast to agentic perspectives, we show how marketplace culture experiences, despite their fun appearance, embody the underlying tensions of the intensifying rationality, regulation, and competition structuring neoliberal society. Finally, we express concern over the marketer's control of playground expression and suggest CCT adopt a more critical stance to the commercialisation of play.

Key Words: Play, marketplace culture, consumer experience, consumer culture theory (CCT), context of context, socio-cultural analysis, macro-micro

The social sciences display considerable interest in play as a type of behaviour inherent to children but have taken much less notice of adult play (Kavanagh, 2012). Play theory has been cast to CCT's peripheral, despite assertions that consumer research investigations of identity creation, self-expression, and communal consumption, are incomplete without coextensive consideration of their playful composition (Kozinets et al., 2004). Arnould and Thompson (2007), while addressing misconceptions surrounding CCT, proclaim CCT does not only investigate 'entertaining esoterica' and 'the wild and wacky worlds of consumer oddballs'. Misconceptions aside, it is necessary that CCT address the frequency of the 'entertaining esoterica' documented by theoretically configuring their playful composition. CCT has an opportunity to develop the understanding of adult play, not only by adopting play to understand consumer experiences (Holbrook et al., 1984; Holt 1995), but also by investigating the commercialization of play, and its impact on individuals and society (Frost, 2012). One stream of CCT research particularly well suited to broader contextual analysis from a play theory perspective is the study of marketplace cultures (Kozinets et al., 2004). Marketplace cultures are considered 'liminoid representations' (Turner, 1979,1982): entertainment-oriented experiences that grant access to a play-world of sorts and provide a temporary subversion of structured life and normal roles (Holt, 1995; Belk and Costa, 1998; Goulding et al. 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; O'Sullivan, et al. 2011). We investigate marketplace cultures –the "epistemological exotica" of CCT (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011)– as instances of adult-play in order to generate additional understandings on how consumers respond to and navigate the macro and micro contexts of consumption.

Research into marketplace cultures, one of the four pillars of CCT research, explores the ways in which 'consumers forge feelings of social solidarity and create

1 distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and sometimes transient cultural worlds'
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4
5 (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 873). Marketplace cultures, primarily discussed as
6
7 subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), brand communities
8
9 (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), and consumer tribes (Cova and Cova 2002), are inspired
10
11 by the pursuit of common interests, grounded in shared beliefs, meanings, mythologies,
12
13 rituals, social practices and status systems (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Cova,
14
15 Kozinets, and Shankar, 2007). The marketplace culture literature is built primarily on
16
17 Mafessoli's (1996) conceptualisation of *tribus* (neo-tribes): theorised as effects of the
18
19 socio-cultural transformations prompted by the transition from modernity to
20
21 postmodernity (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Marketplace cultures are framed as
22
23 empowered responses to the erosion of the traditional bases of sociality and the rise of
24
25 neoliberal inspired individualism (Cova, 1997). As a result, marketplace cultures are
26
27 theorised as agentic social actors engaging in the appropriation of consumption norms to
28
29 satisfy their desires for sociality (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2007; Cova et al. 2007).
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35 Askegaard and Linnet (2011: 386) suggest developing more sceptic perspectives
36
37 to theory framing consumers as agentic components of the market system, as failing to
38
39 do so will downplay the more critical aspects of consumer culture, and limit the impact
40
41 of CCT contributions (Cova et al. 2013; Bode & Ostergaard, 2013). Agentic
42
43 perspectives, celebrating marketplace culture experiences as reclamations of sociality,
44
45 fail to acknowledge the capacity of the market to turn instances of (initial) resistance
46
47 into commercially successful products and services (Bradshaw and Dholakia, 2012).
48
49 The commercialisation of play is a case in point. CCT's agentic rendering of
50
51 marketplace culture is somewhat idealistic. As Mafessoli highlighted (1996: 7-8):
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53 'Utopias become commonplace, thus it is undoubtedly worthwhile fashioning new
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55 interpretations of recurring social practices'. Adopting a play theory perspective to
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investigate the macro-social context of marketplace culture, presents an opportunity to interpret communal consumption as expressions of existence and critiques of social life rather than agentic reclamations of sociality.

First we highlight the appropriateness of a play theory perspective to investigate the macro-social context of marketplace culture. We then scrabble about in the ontology of play, drawing from Huizinga’s (1951) socio-cultural conception of play. Following this, we introduce Caillois’ (1962) typology of player attitudes, and discuss how different types of play inspire different player attitudes. We draw from Sutton-Smith’s (1977) study of amusements, pastimes, and entertainments, to show how players act out forces of order or disorder during different types of play and games. Derived from Caillois’ (1962) player-attitude typology and Sutton-Smith’s (1977) theory of games of order and disorder, we develop an analytical framework to interpret the context of marketplace culture. Prior marketplace culture research is analysed throughout. In contrast to agentic perspectives of marketplace culture, our analysis highlights the degree to which marketplace culture experiences, despite their fun and playful appearances, embody the underlying tensions of the intensifying rationality, regulation and competition orchestrating neoliberal society. We express concern over the marketers’ infiltration of the playground and control of consumer expression therein, which limits opportunities for agentic cultural creativity. Finally, we discuss how CCT has aided the marketer gain control of the playground and propose CCT adopts a more critical stance to the commercialisation of play.

Play as a macro context lens

Play and consumption are intrinsically linked (Holbrook et al., 1984; Holt 1995; Kozinets et al., 2004; Sherry et al., 2007). Holt (1995) builds on the work of Holbrook et

al. (1984), by proposing ‘consuming as play’ as one of the four dimensions of consumption. Consuming facilitates the appropriation of marketplace resources to structure social relationships (brands, products, services, etc.), interactions through which adult play is known to manifest (Boulaire and Cova, 2013; Grayson, 1999; Holt, 1995; Kozinets 2002; Moleworth and Denegri-Knott, 2008; Sherry et al., 2007; O’Sullivan, 2016). Play theory has been successfully adopted to explore the micro-social context of marketplace culture (rituals, objects, language, symbols etc.) (Kozinets et al. 2004; Moleworth and Denegri-Knott, 2008; Sherry et al. 2007; O’Sullivan et al. 2011; Seregina & Weijo, 2016; Kjeldgaard & Bode, 2017). However, the primary contribution of play theory, as we see it, lies in how play can be utilised to interpret the influence of market and social structures and identify patterns of cultural understanding (Geertz, 1972; Sutton-Smith, 1977).

Play is a many-sided phenomenon, treated as a subject of its own (innumerable theories of play) and as a metaphor to explore phenomenon such as language, culture, economics, and even existence itself (Minnema, 1998). Kavanagh et al. (2011) suggest play is eschatological, in that it deals with the ends, limits, and extremes of the human condition – between the real and the imaginary, between the normal and the deviant, and between the human and non-human (Motte, 1995). There is also a functional treatment of play, associating play with building self-esteem; expending surplus energy; language learning; creative problem solving; and a number of other cognitive and personal benefits (Barthes, 1950; Bateson, 1955; Giddens, 1964; Lever, 1978; Motte, 1995; Piaget, 1962). However, our interest lies in the phenomenology of play as a mediation that unfolds dialectically, to and fro between the macro and micro – between the structural and existential (Buytendijk, 1932, in Minnema, 1998).

According to Huizinga (1950:1): “Play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon... It is a *significant* function.... In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action... all play means something”. Today’s toys and games are cultural debris – bows, shields, slingshots, the cup and ball, the top, the kite, the swing, and the mask – weapons, beliefs, and rites that have fallen into disuse (Caillois, 1959/2001). Caillois (1962) argues that similar to the study of economic, political, religious, or familial institutions, the basic themes and patterns of culture are deducible from the study of play. There exist a distinct inter-relationship in play, customs, and institutions. As a result, Fink (1968) concludes that the play world is a mirror of the real world; that play reflects and inverts macrostructural conditions (Barthes, 1984; Turner, 1982) (the game Hopscotch represented the tensions surrounding the assumed journey from Earth to heaven; the popular board game “Go for Broke!” from the 80s represented the ideology of Yuppie culture, for instance). Or as Minnema (1998: 34) states: “play combines communication and meta-communication... In its paradoxical structure of communication, play shows itself to be context and text”. Play and games can be interpreted as symbolic expressions of existence, possessing deep ontological meaning (Fink, 1968; Geertz, 1972). Given the ability of play to absorb and represent macrostructural conditions (Fink, 1968; Turner, 1982), play presents itself as a valuable lens to interpret the macro-social context of marketplace culture experiences and generate additional understandings of consumer representations of social life.

Towards an ontology of play

Play occupies a legitimate although limited place in the rhythm of life, an impulse distant from the ‘usual’ mode of existence (Fink, 1968). Play is an *essential* human

activity foundational to the development of *all* human societies (Huizinga, 1955; Sutton-Smith, 2001):

“Play is an essential element of man’s ontological makeup, a basic existential phenomenon – not the only such phenomenon to be sure, but still a clearly identifiable and autonomous one that cannot be explained as deriving from other existential phenomenon” (Fink, 1968: 19).

Despite ‘winding through culture with astonishing ubiquity’ (Motte, 1995), play remains a fuzzy phenomenon. Due to its cultural complexity play cannot be universally defined (Burke, 1971; Garvey, 1990; Harris and Park, 1983). In absence of an accepted definition of play, we detail Huizinga’s (1950: 1-27) socio-cultural conception of play (voluntary, extra-ordinary, uncertain, disinterested, bound by time and space, ordered, and fosters community), before highlighting the ontological associations of play and marketplace culture experiences.

Play is voluntary

Play is a voluntary activity, during which engagement is neither forced nor demanded (Caillois, 1962). It is not an obligatory commitment but *freely* chosen by the player (Garvey, 1990). Play is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty (Huizinga, 1955). The feelings of freedom provide a sense of escape from the obligatory responsibilities of day-to-day life (Turner, 1982).

Play is ‘extra-ordinary’

Play creates a sphere of action in which the ordinary is no longer present (Fink, 1968). Players shed constricting identities and exist within a behavioural model unlike the

ordinary (Huizinga, 1955): fathers, sisters, friends, managers, and colleagues etc. all become players. Turner (1982) asserts that the ordinary structure of society is suspended during play. Therefore, behaviours normally discouraged can be enacted with zeal (the physical contact in the game Twister, for example). The boundaries of the ordinary do not restrict human behaviour during play (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011): mundane objects are momentarily appropriated as toys (Caillois, 1962) (traffic cones worldwide, for example). The study of play leads deep into the origin of religious concepts—symbolism, ritual, pageantry and procession are have emerged due to the need for play (Caillois 1959/2001). Players asserted connection with the sacred by wearing masks and costumes, which either mimic Godly figures, or induce a time of sacred or magical association (Turner, 1982, 1983). Playing in this sense is considered an ‘act of cosmicization’ (Eliade, 1958), which sees players symbolise the creation of the universe (and life) (Price, 2000) (the symbolism of the piñata, and fireworks, also capture these associations well).

Play is uncertain

Play has a *tension* accompanying it (Huizinga, 1955). Knowing a predictable and pre-distinguished outcome without any potential surprises is against the nature of playing. If play were certain, modern games and sporting competitions could not function (Caillois, 1962). The fascination with play is credited to the spontaneous, capricious, and unconscious involvement it invokes. A freedom is granted to the players to construct an impromptu narrative in which the imagination is free to test the boundaries of creativity (Piaget, 1962).

Play is disinterested

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3 Play does not coincide with the ‘curious futurism’ surrounding all other human activity
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5 (Fink, 1968). Play has no extrinsic goals and motivations are purely intrinsic (Garvey,
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7 1990); it is autotelic in nature and an interlude from the pursuit of wants (Huizinga,
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9 1955). Caillois (1962) claims play is unproductive in the sense it does not create
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11 anything new, that the order of the external world should return to the same as it were
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13 before (hence the tragedy when someone dies while playing). In relation to the personal
14
15 and social benefits of play, while play facilitates learning, children (and adults) typically
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17 do not play to learn, but do learn while playing (Garvey, 1990; Kalliala 2006).
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24 *Play occurs in a defined time and place*

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26 Play is *limited* by time and space, separate from the profanity of mundane life. Play is
27
28 shrouded by degrees of social secrecy (Turner, 1982, 1983), secret handshakes,
29
30 passwords, nicknames, costumes, and masks protect from the external world. Play
31
32 requires a delineated space dedicated to the unique feelings it inspires. A space Huizinga
33
34 (1955) terms a “play-ground” and describes as a “consecrated spot”. Spaces set aside as
35
36 playgrounds are effectively so sacred that the tennis court, or football pitch, are
37
38 indistinguishable from the temple or the magic circle (Huizinga, 1955).
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44 *Play is ordered*

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46 Play creates order. Huizinga (1955) and Turner (1982) highlight the *inevitability* of both
47
48 explicit and tacit playground rules. Rules establish a temporary order within which all
49
50 that matters are those things important to the ‘game’, regardless how frivolous the game
51
52 is regarded by non-players (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Adherence to the rules ensures the full
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54 pleasure of play can be experienced. Rules ensure a unified sequence of events during
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56 which actions become more reflexive and involuntary, what Csikszentmihalyi (1975)
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3 refers to as 'flow'. Playground rules can be so subtle that only active players may
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5 understand their nuances (Garvey, 1990; Reed, 2005): 'a fleeting grin, or wink, may
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7 accompany an otherwise stinging verbal insult' ('yo momma' jokes and other insult
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9 games in youth culture, for instance). The rules of the 'game' are binding: if the rules
10
11 are not complied with the whole play-world collapses. Play has an elevatory quality that
12
13 transcends mundane realities and social inequalities, providing a *limited perfection* in an
14
15 imperfect world (Huizinga, 1955: 10-11).
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20 21 *Play fosters community*

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23 "A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is
24
25 over. The feelings of being 'apart together', of mutually withdrawing from the
26
27 rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the
28
29 duration of the individual game" (Huizinga, 1955: 13).
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35 Similarly, Caillois (1962) claims play is not an individual pastime, 'possessors of
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37 the same toys congregate in an accustomed or convenient place'. Caillois (1962) even
38
39 asserts it can be sorrowful to play alone. The pleasures of 'playing together' can be
40
41 explored using Turner's 'communitas' (1979, 1982, 1983). The experience of
42
43 communitas has something extraordinary about it in which the self is realised, yet
44
45 completely immersed into a synchronised fluid event (Turner, 1979, 1983). The
46
47 importance of communitas lays in the 'being' together, not so much the 'doing' together.
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51
52 Consumer researchers detail a link between communitas and sociality (Belk and
53
54 Costa, 1989; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), whereas communitas can be more closely
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56 linked with play. Sociality can be experienced during instrumental, predictable, and
57
58 conformative states, such as work (Mafessoli 1988), whereas both play and communitas
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are consummatory, unpredictable, and transformative within an event (Henricks, 2006: 192-193). CCT conceptually aligns sociality and *communitas* (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; O'Sullivan et al. 2011), despite sociality and *communitas* being experienced divergently within an event (Henricks, 2006). *Communitas* is the momentary communal freedom experienced in anti-structure (Turner, 1982, 1983), whereas sociality can be a communal freedom still experienced within structure (work, for example) (Maffesoli, 1996). The trajectory of consumer engagement during *communitas* and play are largely undefined, whereas during work, or obligatory ritual, engagement tends to be predefined, either explicitly or normatively (Henricks, 2006; Turner, 1982). *Communitas* is therefore more closely conceptually aligned with play. We now highlight the ontological association between play and marketplace culture experiences to illustrate the appropriateness of the play lens to explore the context of marketplace culture (Table 1).

Table 1. The ontological association of play and marketplace culture

Characteristics of Play	Marketplace Culture
Voluntary	A voluntary engagement based on an emotional ‘free choice’, without strict ideological obligation – “a faith without dogma” (Cova, 1997).
Extra-ordinary	Marketplace culture experiences foster feelings of transcendence, religiosity, authenticity, and existential self-worth (Burns and Fawcett, 2012; Leigh et al., 2006; Muniz and Schau, 2005; Schouten et al., 2007). Consumers transform the <i>ordinary</i> meanings of brands and brand elements, through ritual, processes of co-creation and hijack (Cova and Pace, 2006; Muniz and Schau, 2007). “It is as if consumption, freed from its normal adult status as duty, can return to playfulness; the material world can become seat of the sacred again; consumption can become (re)esnouled” (Kozinets, 2002).
Uncertain	Uncertain excitements and tense narratives surround white-water rafting (Anrould and Price, 1993), skydiving (Celsi et al., 1993), motorcycling (Murphy and Patterson, 2011; Murphy, 2014), excessive alcohol consumption (O’Sullivan and Richardson, 2013), and ecstasy consumption (Goulding et al., 2002) – each a form of risky play. In marketplace cultures less occupied by risk, to safeguard against habituation, consumers alter rituals to ensure experiences remain free and imaginative – discussed as ‘sacralisation maintenance’ (Belk et al., 1989; O’Sullivan et al., 2011). Some marketplace cultures desire ‘tonus’, a tension inspired vitality (O’Sullivan, 2016).
Defined time and place	Liminoid zones regarded as sacred by participants. Set apart in time and space for alternative modes of consumer behaviour, in which idiosyncratic lexicons and rituals clouded with degrees of social secrecy develop (Cova et al., 2007; Langer, 2007).
Disinterested	Participation within marketplace collectives is discussed as being autotelic in nature (Holt, 1995; Sherry et al., 2007). The experience of communal consumption – ‘communitas’ – the being together – a reward of its own (Belk and Costa, 1998).
Ordered	Marketplace cultures develop norms to guide their behaviour, often used to demarcate between true and faux members (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Communal consumption, despite possessing a liberatory ethos, is highly ordered and involves a process of ‘learning the rules’ surrounding appropriate consumption (Goulding et al., 2012: the Saab greeting (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), adherence to the Beamish constitution, (O’Sullivan et al., 2011), or ‘no spectators’ at Burning Man

	(Kozinets, 2002). The rules and guiding norms create a realm in which participants, with otherwise diverse social and occupational backgrounds, can experience flow states together (Schouten et al. 2007).
Fosters community	O'Sullivan et al. (2011) detail the emergence and reification of a brand community and illustrate how an initial playful commercial experience led to consumers repeating brand-orientated rituals to satisfy their desire for play.

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A typology of play attitudes

Caillois (1962: 4) develops Huizinga's socio-conception of play by directing attention to the individual player attitudes assumed during different types of play. Caillois (1962) classifies play according to four fundamental player attitudes: agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation), andilinx (vertigo). Furthermore, play in each of these categories can be placed on a continuum from paidia to ludus. Paidia is wild and less ordered play: 'uncontrolled fantasy in which improvisation and carefree gaiety is dominant' (Caillois, 1962). The early manifestations of paidia have no name and no obvious order is observed: tumult, laughter, and agitation (playing with an emerging tooth) are examples of paidia. Paidia has a taste for destruction. Ludus disciplines and enriches paidia by establishing order. A 'civilizing process' can be observed in ludus. Ludus "relates to the desire to find diversion and amusement in arbitrary, perpetually recurrent obstacles", normally providing occasions for training and skill development (Caillois, 1962: 32). Solitaire, kite flying, crosswords, and video games are examples of ludus. Ludus inspires players with the hope of succeeding the next time, and frequently transforms to competition play (the Rubik's cube transition from solitary to communal competition play, for instance).

Agon (competition)

Agon is the attitude assumed during competitive play. Agon is not to be associated with a motivation to cause injury (Caillois 1962). Elias and Dunning (1986) discuss the brutal nature of ancient Greek Olympic wrestling, however, motivations were honour and immortalization, not to cause injury or death. An equality of rules defines the competition, allowing honour to be imposed on the victor (Caillois, 1962; Morris, 2000). Agon is unknown amongst animals; they have no conception of rules or regulation

(Caillois, 1962; Groos, 1978). Children's competitions such as 'who can endure tickling the longest?' (Kalliala, 2006) or 'starring at the sun the longest' (Caillois, 1962), belong to the agon category of play but are closer to the paidia rather than the ludus pole. The most sophisticated forms of agon are realized in institutionalised sports (Guttman, 1978; Jarvie, 2006). Agon play attitudes structure the marketplace experiences of Warhammer battles (Cova et al., 2007), climbing Mount Everest (Tumbat and Belk, 2011), geocaching (Boulaire and Cova, 2013), and the MG car club vintage showcases (Leigh et al., 2006), to highlight only a few.

Alea (chance)

Alea (Latin for 'dice') is destiny not control; there is no personal responsibility attributed to alea. Unlike agon, for alea it is not the best who wins, but who has the best luck (Caillois, 1962; Kalliala, 2006). Alea play is based on an outcome *independent* of the player: winning is the result of fate rather than skill (Caillois, 1962: 17). Divergent from ordinary time, alea renders intelligence, skill, and effort ineffective. In direct contrast to agon, alea negates work, patience, and experience. The capriciousness of chance contributes to the appeal of alea (Caillois, 1962; Kaplan, 1979; Neighbors, 2002). Alea is either absolute favour or total disgrace. Alea appears to be more attractive for adults and is foundational to many adult playgrounds, Las Vegas (Belk, 2001), online Poker (O'Leary and Carroll, 2013) and eBay (Moleworth and Denegri-Knott, 2008), for example.

Mimicry (simulation)

Mimicry establishes a second reality with its own impromptu rules. During 'make-believe' players become actors, scriptwriters, directors and set designers (Garvey, 1990).

Mimicry ‘makes believe or makes others believe that the player is someone other than him/herself’ by disguising the conventional self and liberating a suppressed personality (Caillios, 1962: 20). The rules of the role-play game consist of the actors fascinating the spectators, while ensuring to avoid an error that may break the spell (breaking the 4th wall for instance, or a beardless Santa Claus). Mimicry provides an immediate escape from the rigid rationality (and conformity) associated with ‘normal society’ by encouraging behaviours bound only by imagination (Turner, 1982). According to Smilansky (1968, in Kalliala 2006), during fantasy play, players enact versions of imposing existential issues. Players develop the ‘as if’ consciousness by creating an alternative reality and to ease tensions experienced in the ‘real world’ (the child returning from school to play teacher, for instance). Theatre, cinema, other drama interpretations, and spectator sports also belong to the classification of mimicry attitudes (Turner, 1982). The exhibition of the performance and feelings of identification double the play in the space: spectators are tensely ‘playing’ too but in a different manner (Caillios, 1959/2001). Mimicry has a cathartic function (Giddens, 1964): observed in the release central to Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002), the popularity of virtual world gaming (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009), suppressed behaviours enacted during Fetish carnivals (Langer, 2007), the performance of fandom (Brown, 2007; Kozinets, 2001), and growing popularity of ‘cosplay’ (Lamerichs, 2010; Seregina and Weijo, 2016).

Ilinx (vertigo)

Ilinx is the pursuit of vertigo – an “attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” (Caillios, 1962: 22). The idea is to momentarily shake the trustworthiness of perception and create enjoyable feelings of dizziness (Kalliala, 2006). The disturbance that

provokes vertigo is commonly sought. Take for example, the raven's acrobatics in strong winds for pleasure, or the child seeking fun by whirling around – through constant rotation the ilinx state of distortion is attained. Consumer research examples include high-wire acrobats (Lyng, 1990), skydiving (Celsi et al., 1993), white-water rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993) and surfing (Canniford and Shankar, 2013). Many machines have been designed to induce ilinx, motorbikes (Murphy and Patterson, 2011) and carnival rides (Belk, 2001) provide a 'pleasurable torture' and turn people pale with dizziness, often to a state of nausea. Intoxication from alcohol or drugs is regarded as a corrupt form of ilinx. In these instances players lack the ability to choose when to revert to normal time. Corrupt ilinx is the foundation of marketplace experiences such as the rave (Goulding et al. 2002; 2009), binge drinking (Hackley et al. 2013, Cocker et al. 2012), the World Series of Beer Pong (O'Sullivan, 2016), and Beamish Tours (O'Sullivan et al. 2011).

Extended play theory

Play is not always isolated to a single play attitude: play and games often consists of a combination of the above attitudes; numerous games are even based on the capacity of play attitudes to associate (Caillois, 1962). Card games for instance, combine the players' skill (agon) with the 'luck' of the deal (alea). There exist a cultural symmetry and compatibility in the agon-alea and mimicry-ilinx pairings. Caillois (1962) deems these pairings to be fundamental to society. Agon and alea are complimentary; both require equity, an equality of mathematical chances, precise rules, measures, and calculations. Agon and alea can be regulated and rationalised: the creation of a regulated equality denied by nature. At the other extreme mimicry-ilinx combinations equally presume a world without regulation, in which the player improvises: 'trusting a guiding

fantasy or a supreme inspiration' (Caillois, 1962), neither of which can be subjected to regulation or rationalisation (ancient carnivals or Woodstock, for example).

Play leads to habits that perpetuate social reflexes, certain behaviours become expected, and as a consequence, opposite behaviours are constructed as oppositional, disloyal, illegal, or even savage (Caillois, 1962). For instance, games of strategic skill dominate cultures where strategic thinking is important and games of physical skill exist where motor skills are critical for adults working life. Play must be understood as an abstraction of the larger system of life (Sutton-Smith, 1977): The attitudes *reflected* in the players provide indications as to the dominant ideologies and tensions within a given society (Elias and Dunning, 1986). The multiplicity of play attitudes in favour or contestation within society provides a framework for interpreting socio-cultural conditions and tensions thereof.

Play attitudes: Games of order, games of disorder

Sutton-Smith (1977:19) explores the types of play roughly defined as amusements, pastimes, entertainments, and diversions, similar to the consumer experiences discussed in the marketplace culture literature (Cova et al. 2007). Developing further Caillois' (1962) attention on the individual player, Sutton-Smith (1977) classifies play according to the different forces acted out by the players. He classifies rule-based games dominated by the agon-alea pairing (e.g. Scrabble, Poker), the games with "considerable orderliness", as "games of order". These games are associated with esteeming control and considered responses to conditions of disorder displaced elsewhere in society. In contrast, Sutton-Smith classifies games within the mimicry-ilinx pairing as "games of disorder" (1977:20), during which players establish an alternative temporary order of their own. These games provide an escape from conditions of intense order and function

as a form of expressive disorder (1977:21) (St Patrick's Day celebrations worldwide, or Arthur's Day Celebrations in Temple Bar, Dublin, for example). Fundamental antagonisms exist between agon-alea and mimicry-ilinx play combination: between rationality and irrationality, stability and instability, and compliance and defiance.

Games of Order: stability and control

Games of order (agon-alea) are considered to be reactions to conditions of disorder elsewhere in society; they esteem control and celebrate order (Caillois, 1962; Elias and Dunning, 1986; Sutton-Smith, 1977). Agon is the principle underlying any administration, military, university, or judicial career. Institutionalised sporting competitions, government administration, and bureaucracy transpire as a type of competition – as an elaborate game of order. Contemporary society wavers instructively between agon and alea (Caillois, 1962). On one hand the reward for effort, persistence, and ability, on the other, coincidence and luck (i.e. merit and hereditary). Birth within contemporary society is comparable to a ticket in an existential lottery, awarding gifts and privileges – some innate, some social. Pure agon is flouted in contemporary society: social stratification infringes and brings with it considerable tensions. Alea is a necessary compensation for agon in society, functioning to establish hope and a radical elevated change in status (Lotteries and casino games, for example). Numbers, quantification, laws, regulation and precision replace unregulated wilder practices as rules of the social game as societies progress. Games of order inspire increased appreciation for regulation, refereeing, and control, ultimately establishing compliances and social order (Elias and Dunning, 1986).

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Games of Disorder: disruption and social upheaval

Games of disorder (mimicry-ilinx) are considered reactions to conditions of order, or fluxes of rationality displaced elsewhere in society. These games esteem disruption and renewal. They are concerned with myth, enchantment, metamorphosis, and festivity and associated with the need to reinvigorate and recharge individuals (and society) (Sutton-Smith, 1977). During ancient festivals, dancing, rituals, and pantomime built to the apogee of ‘collective convulsions of impressive magnitude’ (Caillois, 1959/2001) (drugs, hypnosis, music, clatter, movement, intoxication, and shouting etc.). The momentarily loss of perception associated with ‘carnivalistic life’ encapsulates the vertigo of social and moral order (Bakhtin, 1984). The liberation from rigid (oppressive) rationality is reflected in crude expression and debasing behaviours (O’Sullivan, 2016), a temporary ordered-disorder is established (Sutton-Smith, 1977).

Games of disorder indirectly stimulate imagination and invention by offsetting experiences of monotony and prescribed structure; they providing a brief encounter with an alternative patterning of culture. The intense irrationality central to games of disorder increases the potential for *social upheaval* and *incremental reform* (Huizinga, 1955; Presdee, 2000). Games of disorder allow consumers to experience a form of existential renaissance (Caillois, 1959/2001: 98-107), an experience marked by powerful feelings of renewal following the temporary rejection of social order through destructive forms of consumption (Lyng, 2005; O’Sullivan, 2016). As cultures develop mimicry-ilinx attitudes are replaced by agon-alea attitudes in the form of institutionalized and regulated competitions (Guttman, 1978).

Play theory framework: the context of marketplace culture

Marketplace cultures can be investigated as ‘play-communities’ (Huizinga 1955). The play and games of marketplace cultures can be interpreted as to how ‘the social is speaking through the consumer’ (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011:397). Marketplace culture experiences function as mirrors of society – reflecting and inverting macrostructural conditions (Caillois, 1962; Sutton Smith, 1977; Turner, 1982). Marketplace games of disorder can be read as a desire for instability (diminished rationality and regulation) and social upheaval (change or reform), ultimately, as expressions of *opposition*. Whereas marketplace games of order can be read as a desire for increased stability and rationality, order and control, and ultimately expressions of *compliance* with dominant neoliberal ideology.

While marketplace cultures behave in similar ways, and possess many similar characteristics (Canniford, 2011), players absorb and represent macrostructural conditions idiosyncratically. Some marketplace cultures enact intense and destructive play behaviours; they represent critiques of regulation and over-rationalisation while granting a *temporary* pattern of freedom to consumers (Belk and Costa, 1998; Canniford and Shankar, 2007; Goulding et al., 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Murphy, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2016). Other marketplace cultures incorporate complex play attitudes as celebrations of order and esteem consumption context control (Boyd, 2002; Moleworth and Denegri-Knott, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2015). We now illustrate how through their play and games, consumers navigate the macro and micro contexts of consumption and express the interpretations of social life. Table 2 details our socio-cultural interpretations of marketplace culture from a play theory perspective.

Table 2. Socio-cultural interpretation of marketplace culture

Marketplace culture	Marketplace experience	Marketplace game	Socio-cultural interpretation
Mountain Men (Belk and Costa, 1998)	Mountain Men Rendezvous (costumes, alcohol, nostalgic equipment)	Mimicry-ilinx: game of disorder	Reactance to a cultural context in which all aspects of social life were rapidly propelled by technological and scientific advancements – a ‘fantastic return to the primitive’. A means of coping with increased regulation and rationalisation in relation to work life, job skills and the reallocation of jobs. The rapid and intense fluctuation of rationality and control inspired a disorderly reaction as an abstraction.
Beamish Brand Community (O’Sullivan et al. 2011)	Beamish brewery tours and pubs facilitate desire for ilinx. (excessive alcohol, cigar consumption, and ‘laddish behaviour’)	Mimicry-ilinx: game of disorder	The focus on damaging and destructive play behaviours function as a means to escape and symbolically renew their identity games. Means of coping with and addressing the insecurities surrounding the demise of the traditional markers of masculinity and increase of prescribed acceptable structured masculinities within society – a return to the atavistic as a means of absorbing the rapid fluctuation in the established markers of masculinity. An attempt to establish a safe world in which the shared collective identity was perpetuated through deviant play. Consumers established a temporary ordered disorder of their own making.
Ravers/Ecstasy (Goulding et al. 2002; 2009)	Legal and illegal raves. Black-market resources in the form of recreational drugs. Other resources include clothing brands.	Mimicry-ilinx: game of disorder	Intense forms of disorderly play as a representation of the asymmetry of work-life balance and a response to the alienation and individualization of society. An intense game of disorder as compensation for an overly rationalised routine, and to display revolt of the middle-class conservative values. A desire to be outside the established law, rules, and regulations. Such social upheaval resulted in the emergence of clubbing as an institutionalised controlled celebration of play attitudes.
Warhammer Tribe (Cova et al. 2007/ Park et al. 2007)	Facilitated by Warhammer products, games, and events. Imaginary battle, dice,	Agon-alea: game of order	The rationalization of battle play (war) as a means of addressing tensions surrounding outbreaks of international war and political instability – a necessary offset for disorder. USA and France are the international contexts discussed within the study. We note both countries are

	War figurines		historically considered colonists and currently considered international political superpowers, contributing to international peacekeeping and warfare. We note how war marketplace games emerge in countries where war is a dominant cultural influence.
Everest climbers (Tumbat and Belk, 2011)	Experiences facilitated by the purchase of access to base camp and supporting services. Personalised and constructed competition in the face of the luck of weather and health/fitness.	Agon-alea: game of order	Emphasise on individual control and competition – self-imposed standards of excellence and merit. An individual game of order (controlling uncertainty): A limited opportunity to rise above social status through the accomplishment of an extraordinary feat, an elevation similar to winning a lottery. A consumption experience fulfilling the lack of opportunities to ‘compete’ fairly across the social structures of society. Compliance to the individualised and alienating nature of neoliberal society.
Ebay Community (Boyd, 2002; Moleworth and Denegri-Knott, 2008)	Rational system of exchange and creative self-policing structured by rational electronic interaction and propelled by experiences of competition. Elements of luck surrounding the sourcing of products unavailable in local geographic market.	Agon-alea: game of order	Emphasis placed on esteeming the rationalization of digital culture. Self-control central to the community favours cultural attitudes concerned with individualization and alienation. A celebration of order that refines the emergent digital disordered culture. eBay operates indirectly as a means to alter social status, by operating as a trader (of sorts) and/or a sourcer of products not within price range in physical home market. eBay community’s specific game of order reinforces the rationalization and digitalization of economics and money. The threat of negative feedback perpetuates compliance and competition central to the established market. Players map cultural norms on the emergent digital culture – an additional complexity that society must refine, civilize, and control.

A play theory interpretation of the Mountain Men rendezvous (Belk and Costa, 1998) highlights mimicry and ilinx attitudes as foundational, orchestrated by nostalgic ideals of a less complex and 'primitive' life. These play attitudes, grounded in romanticism, absorb the socio-cultural tensions caused by scientific, technological and digital advancements. The flux of rapid rationality influencing many aspects of everyday life stimulates irrationality as an inverted expressive response (Sutton-Smith, 1977). The Mountain Men can be understood as a collective expression of insecurity and resistance: disempowered consumers seeking existential renaissance by establishing an ideological sanctuary within a second world, without advanced (rational) complexities. They have created an ordered-disorder providing a limited freedom by absorbing the tensions of unanticipated cultural complexity and rigid modernization (Lyng, 2012). The Mountain Men simultaneously esteem enchantment and non-compliance via their forms of nostalgic identification but also express the instability and insecurity displaced in society. The fantasies and primitive behaviours central to their communal experiences, beyond establishing a momentarily playful fiction for consumers (Belk and Costa, 1989), develops the 'as if' conscious and stimulates the potential for an alternative patterning of culture.

However, other consumers, within the same broader cultural context, (subjectively) empowered by technological advances, through their games of order, approve and comply with the rationalisation of structures. We note that within the eBay community emphasis was placed on esteeming the rationalisation of digital culture (Boyd, 2002; Moleworth and Denegri-Knott, 2008). The self-control central to eBay community feedback favours competitive attitudes in line with neoliberal individualisation and alienation. Even at its most effective, eBay perpetuates at best a sense of imagined community (Anderson, 1991) and mutual identification to a lesser

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3 extent. The eBay marketplace game can be read as a reinforcement of the rationalisation
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5 of digital economics and a desire to civilise and regulate the (at the time) emergent
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7 digital wild culture (The disruptive presence of Napster, for example). The threat of
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9 negative eBay feedback fosters compliances parallel to contemporary society although
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11 gamified; eBay consumers map established (esteemed) marketplace behaviours onto the
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13 emergent wild digital culture. While the non-geographically bound playful consumption
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15 eBay facilitated was widely celebrated, the *rigid* eBay game limited the potential for an
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17 alternative mode of digital exchange. The eBay game esteems compliance with
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19 neoliberal structures and ideology, resulting in the eBay game facilitating little beyond
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21 online shopping, now dominated by commercial entities.
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26 The Beamish brand community (O'Sullivan et al., 2011) is another marketplace
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28 culture that can be positioned within a broader cultural context using a play theory
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30 framework. Their game of disorder consisted of a brewery tour and pub-crawl organised
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32 by a group of young male students, during which wantonness and 'laddish' behaviour
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34 was enthused against the backdrop of traditional Irish male rituals. While mimicry and
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36 ilinx were the dominant attitudes directing their behaviour, a macrostructural
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38 interpretation suggests that the disorder is a means of expressing and coping with
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40 insecurities surrounding the 'inversion of the male gaze' and demise of the traditional
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42 markers of masculinity within society (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Patterson and Elliott,
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44 2002). We note how games of disorder are adopted elsewhere in consumer culture to
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46 express and navigate cultural insecurities surrounding gender performances and
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48 paradoxes (Martin et al., 2006).
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54 While sociality was, and still is, an important lens to explore marketplace
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56 culture, adherence to it limits further epistemological development. Sociality is an out-
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58 dated postmodern view that has been rendered problematic by technological advances
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and the emergence of the Internet, and social media (Kozinets et al. 2008; Burns, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012). Experiences of sociality of an ephemeral and mass nature structure online community interactions (Kozinets et al. 2008), whereas the social experiences central to marketplace cultures can facilitate much deeper human relationships and expression (Cova et al. 2007; O'Sullivan, 2016). Revisiting Holt's (1995) typology of consuming, he positions playful consumption as the catalyst for 'communing' and 'socializing': Play inspires sociality and sociality consists of playful elements (Huizinga, 1955; Caillois, 1959/2001; 1962; Holt, 1995). However, primarily as a result of the conceptual responsibility given to Mafessoli's (1996) neo-tribe metaphor and unreflective application of the sociality lens, CCT has failed to capture some of the expressive critiques of social life concealed in the play and games of marketplace cultures.

Play and the CCT research agenda

In this paper we set out to generate additional understandings of the consumer navigation between the macro and micro contexts of consumption. By examining the context of marketplace culture, and rethinking marketplace culture experiences from a play theory perspective, we have highlighted alternative consumer expressions of social life. However, despite Table 2 equitably detailing marketplace culture games of order and disorder, in order to demonstrate the value of our play theory framework, our analysis of marketplace culture notes the dominance of games of disorder and mimicry-ilinx play attitudes (Belk and Costa, 1998; Canniford, 2011; Cova et al. 2007; Goulding et al. 2002; Goudling et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2002; Martin et al. 2006; Murphy and Patterson, 2011; O'Sullivan et al., 2011; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Sherry et al. 2007; O'Sullivan, 2016; Seregina & Weijs, 2016). What then do the intensity and

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3 frequency of marketplace games of disorder tell us more generally about consumer
4 culture and society? Games of disorder provide a foundation for the cohesion of social
5 life of a society unstable and insecure in other respects (Sutton-Smith, 1977; Caillois,
6 1962). The games of disorder central to marketplace culture experiences express the
7 underlying tensions of and opposition to the ‘rationalized competition and rigid social
8 stratification central to contemporary society’ (Caillois, 1962). Games of disorder
9 express a desire for catharsis and *reform*.

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11 As Turner (1982: 54/55) states, liminoid phenomena, such as books, films, plays,
12 and paintings, to which CCT adds marketplace cultures, are abstractions of social
13 critiques, which expose the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of
14 macrostructural conditions. The collective thirst for games of disorder arise from the
15 inability to articulate dissatisfactions with contemporary life and systems,
16 dissatisfactions not directly experienced *per se*, nor easily communicated (Zizek and
17 Finnes, 2013; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). It is not until people seek escape *from*
18 something, will they seek escape *to* something; the experience of the former (structured
19 society) will govern the intensity of the latter (play) (Anchor, 1978). For instance,
20 Goulding et al.’s (2002) rave consumers’ desire for intense experiences can be attributed
21 to the asymmetry of work-life balance in neoliberal society. Such behaviours can be
22 read as an attempt to establish momentary authenticity and freedom – a release or
23 rebellion (Lyng, 2012). The games of disorder discussed across the marketplace culture
24 literature highlight underlying tensions of ideological oppression (Schouten and
25 McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2002) and desire for more agentic experiences within
26 structured society (Anchor 1978). Similar transgressive play behaviours reported across
27 the cultural criminology and sociology literatures are discussed as outburst of resistance

that signifying unstable times (Briggs, 2011; Sutterlüty, 2014; Moxon, 2011; Treadwell et al., 2012; Zizek and Finnes, 2013)

Burke (1971) claimed, “what art, religion and philosophy are for the few, play is for the many: a free, intrinsically satisfying activity governed by rules of man’s own making and giving rise to a finite, meaningful world that man can call his own”. However, this is no longer the case. In an increasing manner the marketer is infiltrating the lore of the playground and prescribing the ‘appropriate’ atmosphere and rules governing play (Kozinets et al. 2004; O’Sullivan, 2016). The problem is that marketer-controlled play (rules, locations, apparel, players) limits the opportunities for human spontaneity, authenticity and meaning, and therefore prohibits opportunities agentic cultural creativity (Anchor, 1978). Restricted (controlled) by marketer sanctioning, games lose their potential for critique and ingenuity. The marketer orchestrating the tone and intensity of playground limits opportunities for authentic consumer expression and the release of existential angst (O’Sullivan 2016).

Similarly to how Barthes (1984: 53-55) claims that children are coaxed into accepting existing cultural conditions through toys and games (trains, soldiers, and shops, etc), shaping children as users and owners (but not creators in the true sense), there are significant compliances built into the consumption games the marketer offers. Consumers are enticed to ‘let go’, and to give into frenzy, but not too much, not beyond the rationally manageable (Goulding et al. 2009; Reith, 2005). The marketer-prescribed rules of the consumption game limit experiences of mystery, magic, passion, and soul – facilitating at best commercially sanctioned spectacle (O’Sullivan, 2016). As a result, adult play has lost its qualities of spontaneity, creativity, and joy (Ehrmann, 1968). If play has too little connection to societal conditions it results in a shallow engagement

lacking agentic creativity, ultimately becoming a dulling compliance (Social networking games like Angry Birds, for example).

Play must be preserved from marketer control and protected as an opportunity for individuals to explore the implications of cultural and social possibilities (Henricks 2006: 219). The significance of this form of “true play” (Huizinga, 1955), lies in its ability for creativity and imagination, enabling people to not only live in the real world, but countless symbolic worlds of their *own making* without enduring consequence or reproach (Burke, 1971). However, the commercialization of play prohibits this, and reduces contemporary play to crude sensationalism (Huizinga, 1955). The marketer in the playground highlights a significant societal problem: instances of expression, resistance, escape, rebellion, catharsis, and of *necessity*, are increasingly under the marketer’s control. By establishing the boundaries of acceptable irrationality of marketplace games, games lose their potential for social upheaval and incremental reform.

The innate human need to play serves to propel the capitalist machine and reinforces the value of its twisted catchall ideology. To facilitate marketplace play and games requires varying degrees of work. Unlike true play, marketplace play is a profitable business. “False play” is what Huizinga (1955: 204-213) termed the activity of organizations adopting play to aid profit-orientated strategies. It also must be noted that behaviour that looks like play is not necessarily play (Anchor, 1978) (the blurred boundaries of a games room within a “cool” working location, for instance). Children can legitimately play in capitalist society but adults cannot (Belk, 2001). Leisure rather than play is constructed as the acceptable term for adult non-work time (Giddens, 1964). However, the main function of leisure is relaxation, in preparation for more work, productivity, and profit. The changing culture of play, dominated by commercialization,

digitalization, and marketer influence, contributes to deficits in social, physical, cognitive and emotional health, fitness, and wellbeing (Frost, 2012). As a result, play is losing its capacity to function as an outlet for authentic expression and agentic cultural creativity (Anchor, 1978). People are being diminished in their capabilities, and opportunities for expression and release are becoming more uniform and regulated (directed). After adopting a play theory perspective on marketplace culture, it is vital to reflect on the extent to which CCT has contributed (unintentionally/indirectly) to the perversion of play.

Marketplace culture research contributes to marketing practice in the areas of new product development and value co-creation (Schau et al. 2009; Cova & Pace, 2006; Fuller et al. 2008; Cova & Cova 2002), experiential marketing and customer satisfaction (McAlexander et al. 2003; Schouten et al. 2007; Sherry et al. 2007), and loyalty programmes, relationship marketing, and community-based initiatives (McAlexander et al. 2002; Forunier & Lee, 2009; Cova et al. 2007; Patterson & O'Malley 2006, 2008). The marketplace culture literature emphasises the development of symbiotic marketer-consumer relationships by attempting to limit marketplace tensions (Cova et al. 2007, Arnould et al. 2009; Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding et al 2009; O'Sullivan et al. 2011; O'Sullivan, 2016; Thumbat & Belk 2011). Whether discussed in terms of the co-creation of value (Arnould et al. 2009), ethnomarketing (Cova & Cova 2002), close-to-consumer-philosophies (Fournier et al. 2001), brand community integration or facilitation (McAlexander et al. 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; O'Sullivan et al. 2011), these managerial processes have been foundational to the marketer successfully infiltrating the playground and hijacking consumer games (Solomon in Cova and Cova, (2002), or Harley Davidson in Fournier et al. (2001), as just two examples). CCT has been somewhat complicit in helping marketer's develop, adapt, and functionalise play

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3 and games as part of communal marketing strategies (Cova et al. 2007; Arnould et al.
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5 2009; Cova & Pace, 2006; O'Sullivan et al. 2011; Goulding et al. 2009). This is not
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7 unsurprising given that at its core CCT is a research brand dedicated to establishing
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9 links between consumer theory and the capitalist machine (Arnould & Thomson, 2007),
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11 however, there are alternative perspectives emerging within CCT proposing increased
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13 macrostructural and political critique (Cova et al. 2013; Thompson 2007). In this vein,
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15 CCT could approach the commercialisation of play from a more critical stance.
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18 Particularly with regard to aiding the marketer gain control of playground, limiting
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20 consumer expression therein, and subsequently reducing opportunities for incremental
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22 social reform.
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26 Cova et al. (2013) claim that CCT is communist, and show how communist
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28 ideology is embedded within CCT frameworks. It may seem strange to associate the
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30 world of play with the Marxist inspired (post-postmodern) CCT research agenda. The
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32 Huizinga-inspired writings on human play are part of an idealist, spiritual tradition that
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34 romanticizes previous centuries of European history; the style and substance of this
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36 tradition were abhorrent to Marx (Henricks, 2006). However, both Huizinga and Marx
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38 were driven by 'a sense that a more colourful spontaneous quality of life once existed
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40 and somehow could be restored' (Henricks, 2006: 26). Both Huizinga (1955) and
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42 Caillois (1962) considered the 'perversion of play' to be one of the most serious
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44 symptoms of the crisis of Western culture. Huizinga's (1950) play theory can be read as
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46 an attack on rationalism and materialism, the mechanisation of culture, and the militant
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48 spectacle and war ideology of fascism (205-11). Caillois' play theory too is critical of
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50 culture: a critique of the imposing influence of competition in Western culture.
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56 The crucial link between Marx and Huizinga, Caillois, and Sutton-Smith is the
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58 shared commitment to the creative possibilities of humans – Marx's account of human
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labour turns out to be not so different from depictions of play. “Being communist means building a new world, where the exploitation of capital and subjection to the State are eliminated” (Negri, 2010, in Cova et al., 2013). Play through the act of cosmicisation creates a new world (Eliade, 1985): voluntary actors mutually withdraw from the ‘real world’ and temporarily rejecting ideological structures – granting a glimmer of freedom resulting from an equality of conditions (Huizinga, 1955; Caillois 1959/2001, 1962; Turner, 1982). Or as Sutton-Smith (1977: 24) claims the alienation embedded in the system can be readdressed in true play. True play, aside from marketer control, encapsulates the ideological spirit of communism although accessed momentarily and enacted too infrequently.

Our socio-cultural analysis derived from play theory aligns closely with the neo-Marxist approach of the Birmingham school that stressed resistance as being central to the activities of youth sub-cultures of the 1970s (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Gavanas, 2008; Thornton and Gelder, 1997). On-going resistance in the form of wilder play behaviours are a logical conclusion (the London riots and the carnival of crime, August 2011, for example): Durkheim’s (1897/1970) theory of anomie suggests that such behaviours would be the outcome of the dysfunctions with the capitalist system (Kavanagh et al., 2011). We highlight the further potential of a more centralised position of play theory within CCT to explore the underlying resistances and the incommunicable dysfunctions central to human experience within capitalist structures (Thompson, 2007; O’Sullivan 2016). The state of play represents the state of culture – play theory provides a crucial epistemological link between the lived experience of consumers and the cultural context to which behaviour responds: the state of play reflects the present but embodies the future.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper we explored the context of marketplace culture and illustrated how a play theory perspective can be used to situate consumer experiences in relation their broader macrostructural influences. Our play theory framework generated additional interpretations of consumer behaviour and exposed the concealed expressions and critiques of social life central to marketplace culture experiences. However, our treatment of play is by no means holistic, nor does it provide a satisfying completeness. Our treatment of play is an incremental evolution by means of a theoretical and analytical expansion of prior uses of play theory within CCT (Boulaire and Cova, 2013; Grayson, 1999; Hollbrook et al. 1984; Holt 1995; Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets et al., 2004; Kozinets et al., 2008; Moleworth and Denegri-Knott, 2008; O'Sullivan et al., 2011; O'Sullivan & Richardson, 2013; Sherry et al., 2007; Seregina & Weijo, 2016; Kjeldgaard & Bode, 2017). Above all, we intend to stimulate critical theorizing surrounding the association of play, consumption, and neoliberal society.

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